Natural Law

Romans 2:12–16

ROMANS 2:12–16

"When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts" (vv. 14–15).

Martin Luther's speech when the Diet of Worms called him to recant his theological views is familiar to most of us: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture or by evident reason I cannot recant. For my conscience is held captive to the Word of God." Of course, the term cannot does not mean Luther was intellectually or vocally unable to take back his statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What he meant was that he would not be able to recant without any consequences. Being subject to the Lord Himself, he could not bow to a different law with impunity.

As a consequence of being the Creator, God is the supreme authority for the entire universe.

Everything in creation exists by His good pleasure, so He answers to none other (Gen. 1:1; Isa. 45:5). The lesser authorities found in the government and family derive their right to govern from the Lord (Rom. 13:1–7), but their rule over us is not absolute. Only His moral law binds our consciences, and we must obey Him even when doing so means we disobey lesser rulers in certain situations.

Our society has embraced moral relativism with a vengeance, at least verbally, but that any laws exist at all is a testimony to the existence of a supreme, objective authority. Human beings write laws because we know instinctively that there is a proper moral order to the universe. We make law because God's law exists, in some sense, on the hearts of all people. Today's passage leads us to this conclusion. Romans 2:14 cannot be read as

giving the Gentiles the right to choose what is right and wrong from a variety of competing options. All Paul means is that the ethical standards of even the non-believers prove that all people are made in the Lord's image and therefore have His moral principles on their consciences. Even those without access to Scripture outlaw the killing of innocent human beings and have clear determinations of when killing is murder and when it is not. The law of God on their hearts tells them there are cases when killing is clearly wrong, even if they do not always interpret this law rightly.

The lex naturalis, or natural law, is what theologians have called the universal sense of right and wrong. Western jurisprudence has been decisively shaped by it, although recent years have seen public education, elected officials, and

law schools increasingly turn their backs on this time-honored concept.

Coram Deo

There are no consistent moral relativists. Since moral relativists say there is no universal right and wrong, they invalidate their beliefs when they complain about being treated unfairly. The fact that no one is a moral relativist guarantees that we can find some common ground with unbelievers when we share the gospel. Appealing to the unbeliever's innate sense of right and wrong is a powerful tool to demonstrate God's existence.